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### **KSU is set to honor a choral icon**

Carl Smith has spent 50 years there training great musicians and teachers

Merlene Davis, Herald-Leader Columnist

When Carl Henry Smith walked into the room in Bradford Hall at Kentucky State University last week, the students there were in the midst of preparing their vocal cords for rehearsal. None of them straightened up or focused more. None gave any indication the man who had entered the room was anyone special. And that was high praise.

The students had entered that room with their minds focused on their music because they had been trained by the best, by Smith, the director of their renowned concert choir. That is what he expects of them.

One young man entered the rehearsal late, wearing a ball cap. With a swift hand, he removed the cap as though he were startled he had forgotten to do so earlier.

"He doesn't have to remind you," said Mary Evans Sias, president of Kentucky State. "He lays out the rules in the beginning, and they know, when you are in that domain, you are in a different place. I think he is a consummate professional and disciplinarian."

For half a century, Smith has had that kind of influence on the young people under his tutelage. He has been the director of the university's choirs since 1958, with only a year off to earn a doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh.

During that time he has produced not only great musicians, but also great music teachers. Some of his students have enjoyed professional singing careers.

Many of them will return next month for the university's Fifth Annual President's Scholarship Gala, a black-tie affair that will be a tribute to Smith.

Soprano Kisma Jordan, deemed a "shimmering soprano voice" by The New York Times, is scheduled to perform to honor her mentor.

"We used to joke that Doc is like a monument there," Jordan said. "He's always there, always been there."

Jordan, who has won numerous awards, first auditioned for Smith when she was in high school and he and the KSU concert choir traveled to Michigan, where she lived.

"He pulled me and pushed me in so many different ways," Jordan said. "He saw the gift that I have, even when I didn't see it. He is just a man who makes you want to be better. He commands it. When he talks, everyone listens."

Born in Terrell, Texas, Smith learned a healthy respect for hard work toiling in the fields with his parents. Sometimes the work was at his great-grandfather's farm, one of the very few in that area owned by a black man.

On weekends, Smith loved going to the movies, where he could watch the cowboys he still loves and listen to accompanying soundtrack that was kind of operatic and yet playful, he said.

In the ninth grade, Smith was sent to Tulsa, Okla., to live with his grandmother, and it was then that the world of music opened for him.

"I was singing in the ninth grade," Smith said. "And I was singing pretty well. I think my family knew I could sing. They said I was singing that opera stuff.

"'You'll never get a job,' they'd say. 'Ain't no black person going to be on the opera stage.' They were right for the most part, unless you were Leontyne Price and very, very unusual. I didn't have a very, very unusual voice. I had a very nice voice. I wasn't like those guys."

Smith headed for Lincoln University in Missouri to study music.

"It was one of the best decisions I ever made," he said.

After graduating from Lincoln, Smith had three job offers: teaching string instruments at various segregated public schools in Tulsa; teaching voice at Southern University in Baton Rouge, La.; and choral director at Kentucky State, which is what he wanted to do.

There weren't many choir members when Smith came to Frankfort. Maybe 24. So he stopped students to ask whether they had sung in their high school choir. In two weeks he had 38 members, and it continued to grow after that.

Soon the choir was invited to perform in Nassau, Montreal, Las Vegas and New York, and it began to win numerous awards.

"The most outstanding thing for me is to see students come here with minimum experience, and once they leave become teacher of the year and outstanding church choir and high school choir director," Smith said. "We have many who are successful performers."

Smith has had opportunities to leave, but he stayed. Kentucky State grew on him, he said.

"It seems like there was always something to do that was important to my students and this university," he said. "So whenever there was talk about (Kentucky State) not being viable or not contributing like it should, to the extent of closing it, it always bothered me.

"For people not to know and understand the black experience of our youngsters, it has always bothered me," Smith continued. "So much more has been accomplished than left unaccomplished as a result of our students attending schools like Kentucky State University. I think that probably more than anything else, more than everything else, that used to bother me."

Consequently, Smith decided to teach his choirs to sing all music, classical to gospel, some with foreign text. Anything any other university choir sings. And he teaches it in a way that is healthy for the voice.

But what is so important about a choir? Why should universities have one?

"The choir is life itself," Smith said, his voice slowing and softening. "Choral music is the individual expression of each one of us, using that God-given instrument that is built inside of us. It is the one instrument that can portray the words as well as the beauty of its instrumental offering."

In addition to being honored at the gala, Smith will conduct the annual performance of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities National Concert Choir at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in August. He was selected as one of three national conductors for the 105-voice choir.

"That's one of the highest honors you can get, when other conductors select you," Smith said. He has chosen a contemporary work: John Rutter's Gloria, a three-movement choral piece featuring brass, percussion and organ.

"I think he is one of the icons of the choral music world," said Everett McCorvey, director of University of Kentucky Opera Theatre. "He is known throughout the country for choral music, music education and for the energy he brings to his choirs and the students at Kentucky State."

McCorvey has lived in the Bluegrass for 17 years, and he said, laughing, that Smith has threatened to retire each of those years.

"Every year something brings him back. He sees a need in the business in terms of what he is doing, and I think he loves what he is doing."

Smith, who works part-time, agrees.

"It always pulls me back," he said. "The problem is I feel fine. I don't know how effective I am, but I feel fine. Every year it just seems like there's something else that needs to be done."

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The Fifth Annual President's Scholarship Gala

What: A Tribute to Dr. Carl H. Smith, A Man of Note: Leading in Musical Excellence for 50 Years

When: 7:30 p.m., April 11.

Cost: \$75 for gala; \$150 for gala and 6 p.m. VIP reception package.

Call: (502) 597-6760